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# NALANDA



By

**M. H. KURAISHI, B.A.,**

*Offg. Superintendent,*

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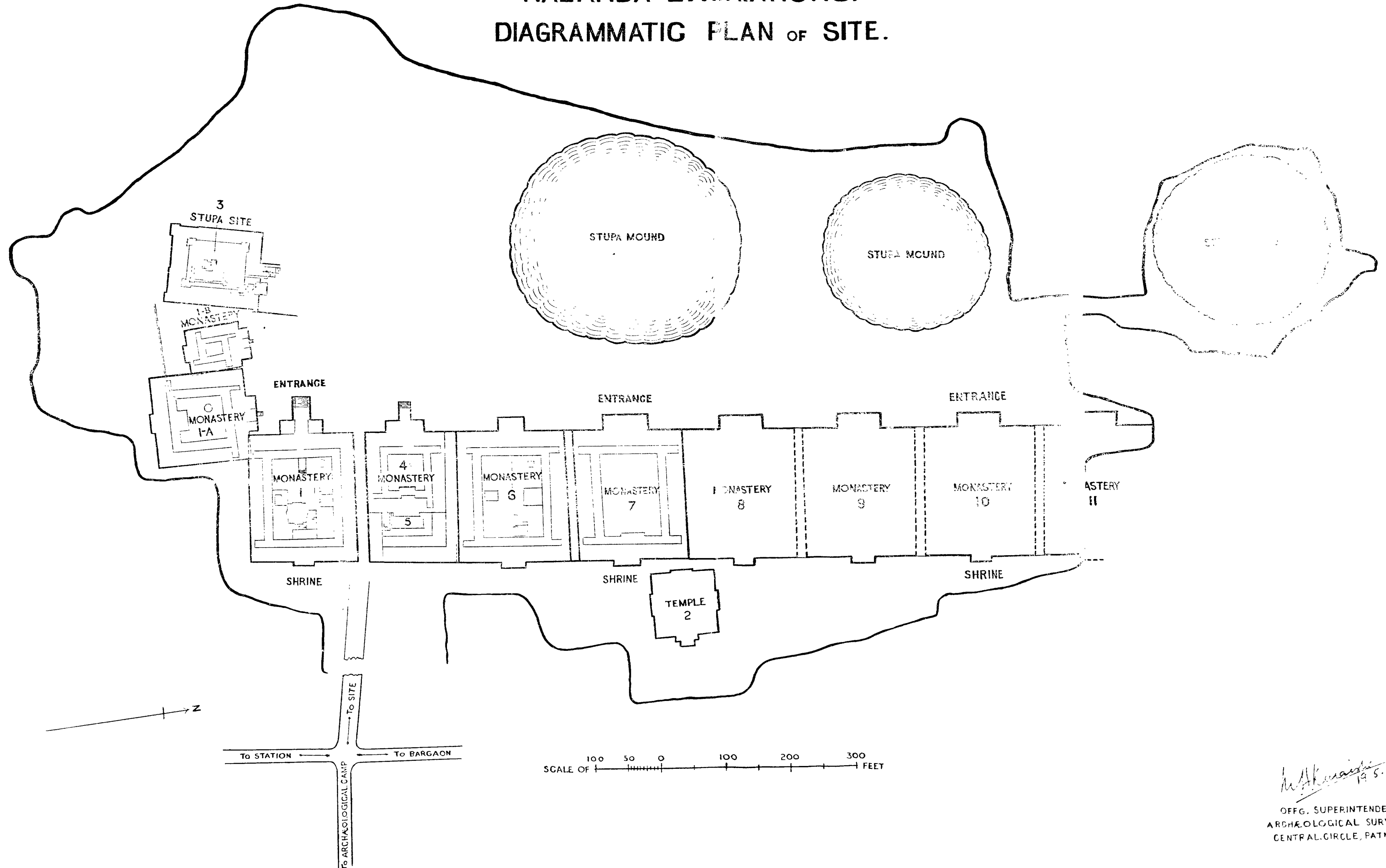
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# NALANDA EXCAVATIONS. DIAGRAMMATIC PLAN OF SITE.

PLATE I



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**A short Guide**  
**To The**  
**Buddhist remains excavated at**  
**NALANDA**

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## PREFACE.

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This short guide to Nalanda has been written to meet a public demand for a brief description of the site and its remains but makes no claim to give a full and conclusive account of either the remains themselves or of the results of the activities of the Archæological Department at this site, Detailed accounts of these monuments and their excavation from the year 1915, when operations were first started, will be found in the Annual Reports of the Archæological Survey of India published by the Government of India Central Publication Branch.

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## A short Guide to the Buddhist remains excavated at Nalanda.

Fa Hian, the Chinese pilgrim who visited India between 405 and 411 A.D., makes no mention of Nalanda. But Yuan Chwang (or Hiuen Tsang), who followed him between 630 and 645 A.D., describes the place at some length. So it is probable that the famous monasteries of Nalanda came into existence sometime between 400 and 600 A.D., although it is not impossible that an unimportant convent might have existed here for a long time before the local rulers began to take interest in the institution and constructed monasteries which later kings added to and made famous by their endowments for the encouragement of Buddhist learning.

The present name of the locality is Bargaon, which has been identified with the *Vihara-grama*, on the outskirts of which was situated the great Nalanda Monastery, the most magnificent and the most celebrated seat of Buddhist learning in the world. Yuan Chwang records the tradition that 500 merchants purchased the site of Nalanda for 100,000 gold pieces and presented it to Buddha, who preached the Law here for three months. According to Yuan Chwang, the first convent at Nalanda was built by an old king of this country called Sakrāditya, and five other kings, four of whom were direct descendants of Sakrāditya and the fifth a king of Middle India, built monasteries to the north, south and east of the original convent.

In Yuan Chwang's time the Monastery sheltered several thousand priests of the highest ability and talents, whose fame spread over wide regions. Their conduct is stated to have been exemplary, they followed with all sincerity the teachings of the moral law, and the monastic regulations in force were of a rigid character. The abbot in charge of this Monastery was Silabhadra, who admitted the distinguished Chinese pilgrim to king Baladitya's College at Nalanda.

**Site.**—The remains of Nalanda include a range of numerous massive brick ruins running north to south and covering a space of about 2,000 feet by about 700 feet. To west is a line of stupas some of which are very large, others quite small; and to east of the stupa line is a range of *viharas* or monasteries, several of which have been exposed by the Archaeological Department (Plate I). Before this Department took up the excavation work at Nalanda, the site had been excavated by Mr. Broadley, a Deputy Magistrate of Bihar, by General Cunningham in the seventies of the last century, and probably also by amateur archaeologists and treasure seekers, and numerous sculptures and other small antiquities were removed. General Cunningham was of opinion that he met with the finest sculptures in India at this site; and there is no doubt that a large number of the finest sculptures now in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, came from here.

The exploration of this site will take many more years to complete. The operations summarised in this pamphlet were started in 1915-16 under the direction of the late Dr. Spooner who also supervised the work during the

following two seasons. Since then the excavations have been superintended by Mr. J. A. Page except for a short period when Dr. Hirananda Sastri was in charge of the operations. To Mr. Page is entirely due the admirable conservation of the excavated remains.

The ancient site of Nalanda is situated less than 2 miles from the small Railway Station of that name just about midway between Bihar and Rajgir. An unmetalled road leads from the station to the site and no conveyance or accommodation of any sort is available. The best plan for visitors, therefore, is to come to Nalanda by the train which reaches there in the morning and to leave by the afternoon train.

**Museum.**—The little Museum, in which are kept the sculptures and other antiquities discovered from the site, is located in the west wing of the Archaeological Bungalow; and is open daily for one hour only, *viz.*, from 12 noon to 1 p.m. As there is no regular custodian in charge of the Museum, visitors who desire to see the Museum can only see it during the hour specified.

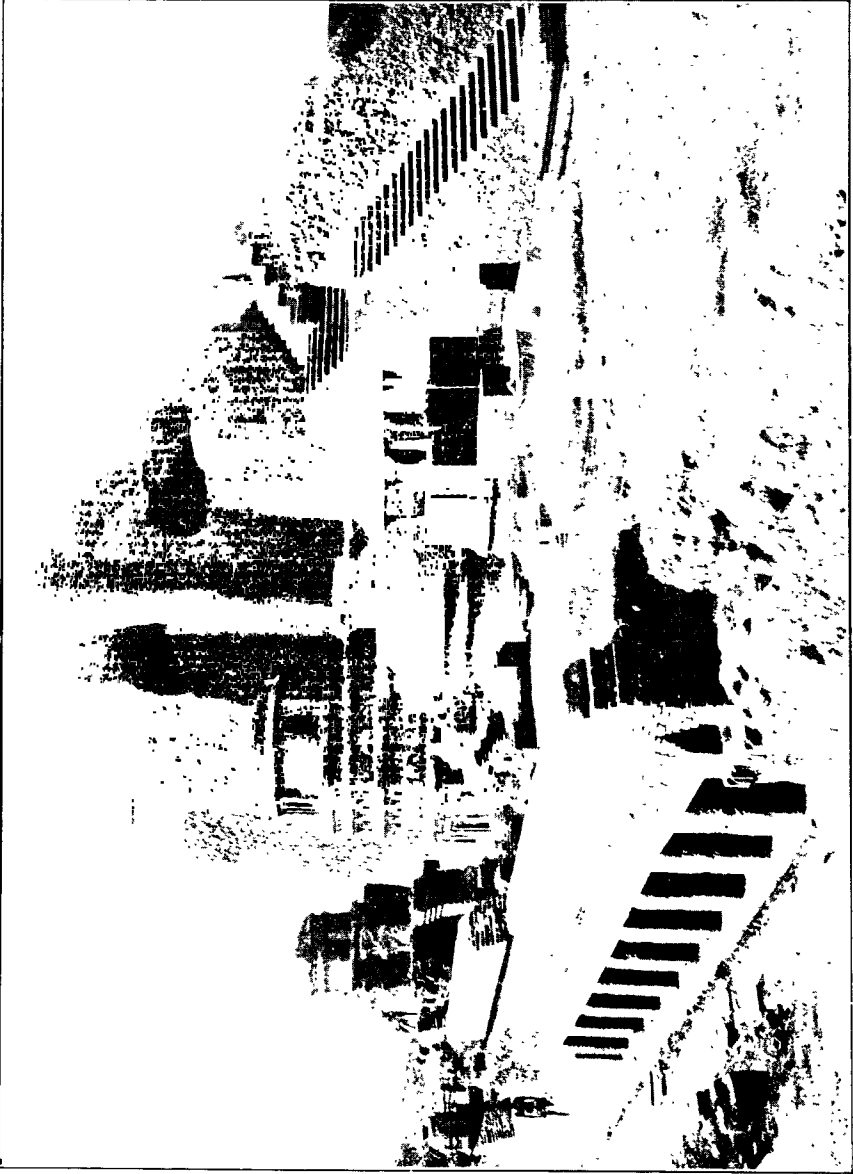
**Permits.**—Before visitors can be allowed to enter the site they are required to obtain "Permits" from the camp office of the Archaeological Superintendent at Nalanda. Not more than 6 persons can be allowed to see the site at one time, and then only in company of a chowkidar; and children under 12 are not admitted. Further, visitors are not allowed to take photographs.

**The Site.**—The approach road to the Site leads through an old passage between the side walls of Monastery No. 1 on the left and Monasteries 4 and 5 on the right.

On entering through the gate at the east end of this passage the visitor will proceed westward until he enters the open space between the row of stupas on the west and that of monasteries on the east. Since the main Stupa exposed at the south end of the stupa row is at once the largest and most imposing structure at the site, we shall begin our description with that of this monument.

**Main Stupa 3.**—This stupa is a huge square structure standing in the middle of a court surrounded by a number of small votive stupas, many of which were built one over the other on the same spot, even twice or thrice. In the course of excavations it was found that the stupa was originally a very small structure enlarged by later stupas built over and around the ruins of earlier ones; the present mound thus containing no less than 7 stupas one upon another. The first three of these stupas were found buried deep in the interior of the mound. They were all under 12 feet square; and owing to the shattered condition of the later remains above them it was found necessary to cover them up again. The remaining four integuments which can be examined on the spot were extensive structures approached by broad flights of stairs on the north face. The 4th of these stupas to be successively built is the most interesting and the best preserved. It is decorated with rows of niches containing well-modelled figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas on the corner towers, which have survived better than the façades connecting them

PLATE II.



NALANDA : Main stupa, general view ; from north-east.



(Plate II). These later additions also followed the square plan of the original stupa and in each case a square framework of encasing walls was built on each side, to give suitable support to the additional masonry to be erected, the casing being then filled in to form a solid core for the enlarged stupa. (See plan, Plate I.) As the main stupa increased in size with every addition, the level of the original court gradually rose, and many smaller stupas are found in several places completely or partially buried in the various floors that have been unearthed. At the north-east corner of the Main Stupa is a high platform on which are situated several votive stupas and in one corner a square chapel containing a large standing image of Avalokitesvara, which is now protected by a wooden shed. At the summit of the Main Stupa were found traces of a small chapel enshrining a cult image instead of the usual umbrella and harmika railing met with in the stupas at Taxila, Sanchi, etc. But visitors are not at present allowed to go up to the top of the stupa. General Cunningham identified this stupa with that mentioned by Huan Chwang as marking the place where Buddha dwelt for three months and preached the Law to the gods.

To the south-east of the Main Stupa is a small shrine containing a stone image, which is believed to be that of Nāgārjuna.

To the east of the Main Stupa (site No. 3 on plan) and on a higher level, are the remains of two Monasteries marked No. I A and I B in the plan; and further to the north-east a large monastery marked No. I which being the most important of the group we shall describe in detail :—

**Monastery I.**—The main entrance of the monastery lies in the west wall through a large portico 49 feet by 23 feet 6 inches of which the roof originally rested on pillars, the stone bases of the pillars being still *in situ*. Later, this portico was converted into a porch with an antechamber by the addition of walls which narrowed down the door to 6 feet. Flanking this door were found traces of stucco figures which, having been badly damaged by fire in ancient days, fell to pieces as soon as they were exposed. Similar figures were also found in the large niches in the north and south walls of the portico. One of these niches is now temporarily filled in, the other shows the lower part of a seated figure which, it will be seen, was also damaged by fire.

In the north-west corner of the antechamber of this entrance was discovered a copper plate inscription of Devapāla, the third king of the Pala dynasty of Bengal, who reigned during the latter half of the 9th Century A. D. The record mentions that Sri Balaputradeva, king of Suvarṇadvīpa or Sumatra, built a monastery at Nalanda and gave five villages in his own country to Devapāladeva in exchange of certain villages that the latter granted in the districts of Rajagriha and Gaya in the Srinagar (*i.e.*, Patna) Division for the upkeep of the monastery and for the comfort of the monks who came to Nalanda.

An important point that the excavations at Nalanda have revealed is that the site was deserted and re-occupied several times. Thus in this Monastery site No. I, no less than 9 strata have been discovered, and they are indicated by as many concrete pavements found at different levels one beneath the other and by the remains of superimposed walls.

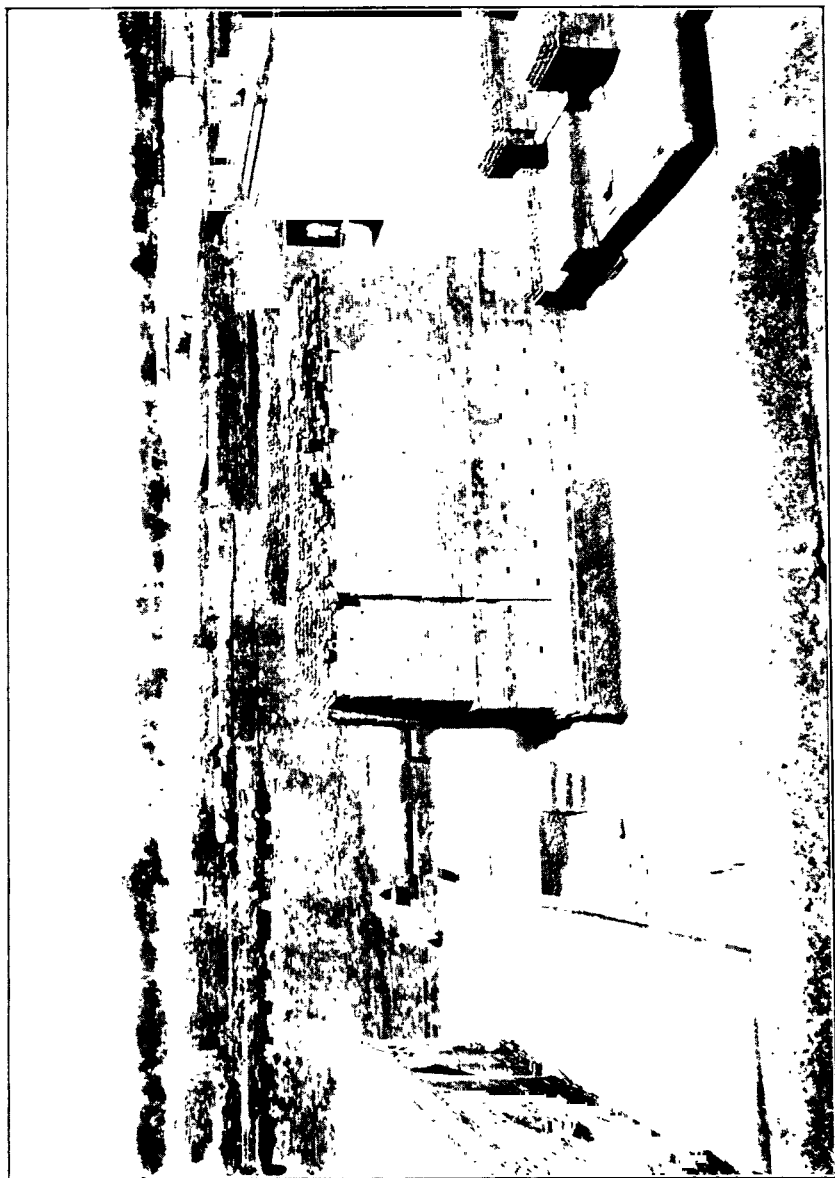
The lower monastery, of which the cells are seen near the entrance on the west side and also along the south and east sides, is believed to have been constructed during the reign of king Devapāla--possibly by the king of Sumatra as mentioned in the copper plate record referred to above. The Monastery consists, as usual, of a number of monks' cells with wide verandahs in front set round an open quadrangular court, the main shrine being placed centrally in the east side directly opposite the main entrance. It was originally a structure of at least two storeys, probably more, as is apparent from the existence of a stair in the south-west corner. Several of the cells have been excavated and have revealed the existence of a still earlier monastery underneath, the concrete pavement of the lower cells being found some 5 feet below the concrete pavement of the Devapāla level. The rough masonry above the fine masonry of the lower cells belongs to later structures of which the foundations were built down on to the remains of the ruined earlier structure below. These upper walls, it will be seen, project beyond the lower ones in places and the projections are not uniform. The explanation seems to be that at the time of the construction of the later monastery the whole space forming the earlier verandah was packed with the fallen débris of the upper storeys of the earlier monastery and therefore it made no difference whether the foundation of the new walls rested on the remains of old walls or on the hard surface of the fallen débris.

The concrete lintels and beams supporting the projecting portions of the later structures above the lower rows of cells (Plate III) have all been inserted by the Archaeological Department in order to preserve and exhibit the later remains exactly as they were found.

The main shrine of the lower monastery is situated in the middle of the east side and originally contained a colossal figure of the seated Buddha of which indications of a crossed leg and drapery still exist. Several broken figures of stone also exist in the eastern verandah, one of which at the south end shows the legs and pedestal of a Trailokyavijaya (the conqueror of the three worlds--Heaven, Earth and Hell) wearing a long garland of Buddha figures in various attitudes and trampling Siva and Pārvatī under his feet. On the pedestal is inscribed the Buddhist creed formula *Ye Dhammā, etc.*, in characters of about the 9th century A. D. Two broken standing figures are also seen at the north end of the verandah, and pedestals of similar figures exist in front of the cells in the east row. The platform with a number of stone column bases on it in front of the shrine on the other side of the later high wall built over the verandah parapet was evidently the plinth of a portico. The solid rectangular Chaitya in the middle of the courtyard is a later structure which has been underpinned for the lower five feet or so in order to preserve the old structure above, as will be seen from the existence of an original tilted stair at the north end of its east face. The little square chapel to the south-west of the Chaitya, on the other hand, is an earlier structure and the bold carving of the *linmaris* on the stone slabs fixed on its north face is ascribable to about the 7th century A. D.

Between the floors of the lower and upper monastery cells is a difference of nearly 14 feet. The central court was cleared by the later builders to

PLATE III.



NALANDA : Monastery No. 1, Courtyard, general view, showing central chaitya and earlier structures from north-west.



obtain access to the old well in the north-west corner, and a wide stair-case was built against the west row of cells to lead down to the lower level. At the

**Vaulted Rooms.**

same time a set of two rooms were constructed against the north retaining wall of the later monastery. These chambers have corbelled entrances facing south and vaulted roofs, the vaults being among the first examples of the true arch prior to the Muhammadan conquest. The purpose of the rooms is not apparent, for nothing was found inside them. The verandah in front of them, however yielded several sculptured fragments of some interest which include one remarkable plaque of fine-grained stone representing the eight principal events in the life of the Buddha, *viz.*, the Birth, the Enlightenment, the Descent from the Trayastrimsa heaven, the offering of bowls of honey by the monkeys, the Taming of the mad elephant Nalagiri, the First Sermon in the Deer Park at Benares, the Miracle of Śrāvastī, and the Mahāparinirvāṇa, which last alone is missing.

Later when the upper monastery also fell into ruins, the level of the courtyard rose to within a couple of feet of the verandah and cell floors of the latest monastery to be erected at the site: and the whole of the courtyard was concreted over. Three successive layers of this concrete were uncovered and have been preserved in the south-west corner of the court. From these and from the several other concrete pavements recovered lower down in the courtyard, it is clear that the level of the court rose steadily through the accumulating of rubbish and débris from the monasteries above.

At the west end of the north verandah of the monastery and coincident with the Devapāla structure was found a damaged copper plate inscription of king Dharmapala and close to it another of Samudragupta, but the precise significance of these finds has yet to be established. It will be observed that the cells of the upper level monastery are built with recesses which contain beds for the monks—a feature which is generally absent in the earlier monasteries below. From this uppermost level visitors may cross over to the upper level of monastery No. 4 adjacent to the north. The old stair seen in the south-west corner as one enters the monastery was used for going up to the roof and probably to upper storeys of this building.

**Monastery 4.**—Immediately below and to west of it is another stair and this belongs to an earlier monastery, on the ruins of which the upper one was constructed. An interesting and unusual architectural feature here is the remnant of the old sky-light above the lower landing of the earlier stair. Nothing like this has been found elsewhere at Nalanda. The platform in front of the shrine in the east side (upper monastery) apparently supported a portico. The stones placed at regular intervals on the parapets of the verandah served as the bases of wooden pillars which supported the original verandah roofs.

The northern half of this monastery was excavated right down to the lowest level of occupation and revealed the existence of an earlier monastery on the same site, evidently belonging to the Devapāla period. That the

upper monastery did not form the first floor of the lower monastery is evident from the existence of the main shrine which is situated exactly over the lower and earlier shrine ; and also from the existence of a drain in the north-east corner of the upper court, which was carried through the verandah parapet, and right through the front and back wall of a cell in the upper monastery.

Near the east end of the north verandah of the lower monastery, about 3 feet below the Devapāla level, was found a gold coin of Kumāragupta (413—455 A. D.) of the Archer type, which is one of the earliest antiquities recovered at Nalanda : but the find cannot be accepted as conclusive evidence for the date of the structure in which it was found. Traces of the destruction of the lower level monastery by fire exist in the shape of burnt wooden door *chaulhats* and fused bricks and mud mortar of the face masonry of the walls.

**Monastery Annexe 5.**—Through a cell in the south-east corner of the upper monastery in site No. 4 we descend by a large stair to Monastery Annexe No. 5, of which only the east line of cells has so far been exposed and conserved.

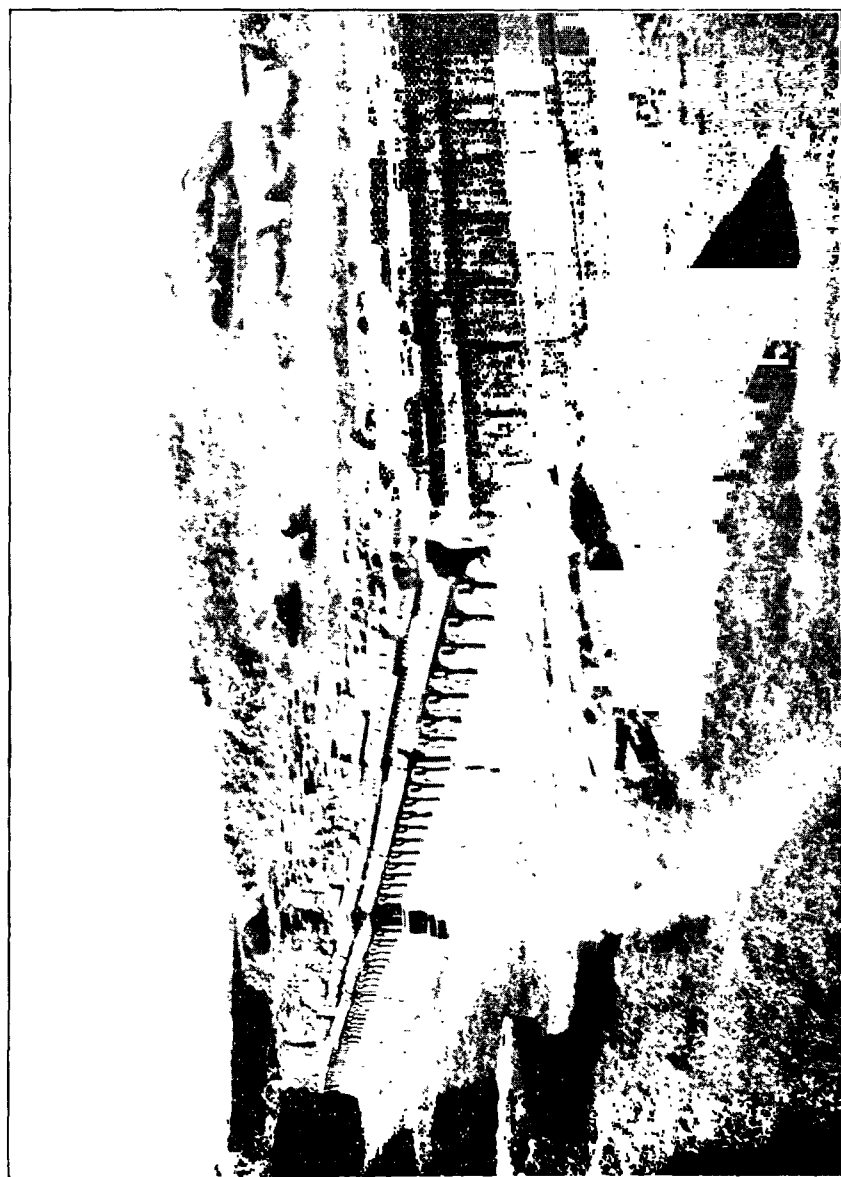
**Monastery 6.**—Here there are two rows of cells, one behind the other and the cells in the front row communicate with each other through corbelled doorways. Over the front wall of these cells the visitor may proceed northward until Monastery No. 6 is reached. This monastery, it will be observed, contains two brick-paved courts, the lower one of which belongs to the earlier monastery that was erected on the site before the upper one was built on its ruins. A feature of interest here are the two sets of double *chullas* or ovens in the upper court which the monks must have used for cooking their food in ancient times. This monastery like the other larger ones already seen contains its own well in the courtyard.

**Monastery 7.**—The passage between Monasteries 6 and 7 leads (westward) into the open space between the rows of stupas and monasteries once more. To right or north of the west end of this passage is the main entrance of Monastery No. 7. Here, as shown by the three different sections into which its court has now been divided, three successive monasteries were built at the site each over the ruins of a previous one and almost exactly on the same plan.

**Stone Temple 2.**—To north of No. 7 is Monastery No. 8, the excavation of which is in progress. Immediately behind (*i.e.*, to the east of) Monastery No. 8 is a ruined stone temple facing east, the feature of special interest in which is a dado of 211 sculptured panels on the façades.

The pilasters that separate the panels of this dado are surmounted by trefoil arches ; and the panels are decorated with a pleasing variety of sculptures—human figures in various attitudes, *kinnaṛis* playing on musical instruments, Siva and Pārvatī in separate panels or together in one, Kārtikeya with his peacock, the Kachchhapa Jataka cleverly represented, Buddha ? with writing materials, scenes depicting archery, geometrical designs, the heraldic mask so popular in Gupta and later art, a human-

PLATE IV.

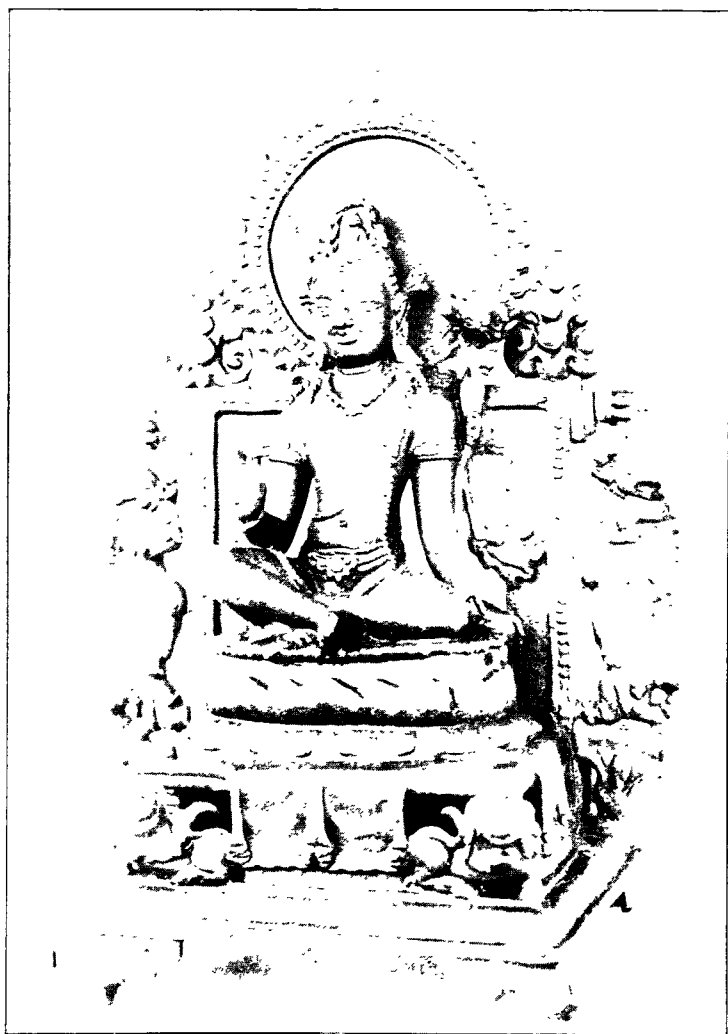


NALANDA : Stone temple, general view, from south-east.





**PLATE V.**



**NALANDA : Bodhisattva (Bronze) from Monastery No. 1.**



PLATE VI.



NALANDA : Tara, 18-armed (Bronze), from Monastery No. 4.

headed bird with a foliated tail, a snake charmer, Gaja-Lakshmī, Agni, Kubera, Makaras and a number of other devices (Plate IV).

About a hundred yards to the north-west of the temple is a huge stupa buried in the Autali Dharahar mound at the north end of the stupa row. A small portion of the plinth of this stupa has been exposed and shows a dado containing two series of panels which were originally decorated with low pilasters of pot and foliage design. At the foot of the mound, to the east, is an inscribed statue of Buddha in *bhūṣaṇa* attended by figures of Vasumitra and Maitreya below and Śāriputra and Maudgalāyana above, as specified in the inscriptions incised beneath them. Close to this, in an enclosure, is preserved a colossal image of the ascetic Buddha locally known as Batuka Bhairava, which it seems was originally enshrined in the huge Stupa or Temple near by. General Cunningham identifies the stupa with the temple of Bālāditya: but his identification of the Nalanda remains must be regarded as only tentative.

The fame of Nalanda throughout the mediæval period was spread far and wide. Evidence of the wide renown of Magadha—roughly the modern Province of Bihar, as the centre of the Buddhist world—is afforded by the fact that Vati, or Hsiao Yen, the first Liang emperor of China, who was an ardent Buddhist, sent a Mission in A. D. 539 to Magadha to collect Mahayanist texts and to obtain the services of a competent scholar to translate them. The king of Magadha, probably either Jivitagupta I or Kumāragupta III, gladly complied with the wishes of the emperor, and placed the services of the learned Paramārtha at the disposal of the Mission, which spent several years in India, and which Paramārtha afterwards accompanied back to China, taking with him a large collection of the manuscripts he had translated. Even with the political decadence of Magadha after the 8th century, Nalanda continued to enjoy its reputation as the centre of Buddhist culture, and retained it under the patronage of the Pāla Kings; though latterly royal favour seems to have been largely bestowed on the rival establishment of Vikramasila, possibly the modern Colgong in the Bhagalpur District. The monasteries appear to have been finally deserted early in the 13th century when the Province was conquered by Ikhtiyaruddin Khalji.

The Gazetteer says that, from this Nalanda Monastery Padmasambhava, the founder of Lamaism, went to Tibet in A.D. 747 at the invitation of the Tibetan king, and that traces of its widespread influence may even now be seen in the Lhobrak valley, where there is a shrine built on the model of Nalanda.

**Minor Antiquities.**—Among the minor antiquities recovered at Nalanda are stone sculptures (several of which are still kept where they were originally found) and a large number of inscribed clay seals, earthen vases, bronze statuettes and censers, iron padlocks and a few coins and copper plates and inscribed bricks. All these have been placed in the little Museum located in one wing of the Archaeological Department Bungalow. Two of the figures are illustrated in Plates V and VI.





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